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The Intext of "Superfluous Man" in Contemporary American Fiction

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Abstract

This paper discusses the Russian literary intext of "superfluous man" incorporated in the fiction of two contemporary American authorsThomas McGuane and David Bezmozgis, whose main characters are arguably modelled on Pechorin, the protagonist of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*. Theintext of "superfluous man" is just one example of the reoccurring dialogue between American and classical Russian literatures echoing the trend of the early twentieth century. Russian texts once again become mediators to transcend boundaries and contribute to translating individual narratives into transcultural stories.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, transcultural intertextuality has become a phenomenon of increasing experimentation. One noticeable trend is the way many contemporary American authors refer to classical Russian literature in their writing.As they do so, they most commonly employ two strategies: incorporating personalia and incorporating concepts. These inclusions can be discussed as (micro)-intexts (texts within texts), a category introduced by Estonian semioticionPeeterTorop to discuss various textual inclusions. Torop describes intext as a "semantically loaded segment of text, whose meaning and function is defined by at least double description" (Torop, 1995: 132) and categorizes allusions, (quasi)citations and other textual borrowings as intexts.The category of intext has become

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an important constituent in intertextuality studies, including their transcultural strand. This paper also relies on Gérard Genette's concept oftranstextuality, which he defined as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether isobvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette, 1997: 1). The paper arguesthat the novels by Thomas McGuane and David Bezmozgis present two varieties of contemporary "superfluous man": one can be described as an "internal outsider" and the other as an "external outsider".

2. "Superfluous Man" as an "Internal Outsider"

Thomas McGuane'sfiction has long established his status among the best contemporary American writers. His typical character is a suffering, alienated man such as Patrick Fitzpatrick, a protagonist in *Nobody's Angel* (1982), the novel often estimated as one of the author's best (Bourjaily, 1982;McClintock,1997). Towards the end of the bookFitzpatrick comes with the following self-assessment:"He thought for a moment, literally thought, about what he had set out for; and he knew one thing: he was superfluous" (McGuane, 1986: 223). Interestingly, a similar self-estimation occurs at the end of Waiting (1999), a novel by Chinese American author Ha Jin. HaJin's protagonist can perhaps be compared to Oblomov, the "superfluous man" in the eponymous novel by Ivan Goncharov (1859), and deserves separate attention. Vance Bourjailynotes in his review that by this word the character "has been placed by his author in a clear line of literary descent – that of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov's Pechorin in *A Hero of Our Time*– which creates an interesting subtext, subtle allusion rather than open parallel" (Bourjaily, 1982).

Indeed, Pushkin and Lermontov's characters opened the so called "gallery of superfluous men" in Russian literature, though the type originated in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.The term was popularized by Ivan Turgenev's novella *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850)and then retroactively applied to these and other Russian characters of the earlier part of the nineteenth-century.Despite the cultural, temporal and spatial gaps, McGuane's Fitzpatrick can be discussed as a distant descendant of Lermontov's reckless hero on several grounds.

As it is typical for superfluous men, none of the heroes belongs in the state-centered pattern, though theyare both military officers. Their actions are often self-destructive, they disregard the social values and standards of their time; they are bored and withdrawn. Patrick Fitzpatrick is older than Pechorin; he is more mature andfar less cynical. The novel begins as he retires and comes to settle at his family ranch and take care of his grandfather and mentally unstable sister. However, the obsession with danger, for romantic characters inevitably involving horses and women, leads both characters to disastrous consequences.

The feminine and equine motifs are inseparable in both novels, and the beauty of horses and women is often equaled.In Lermontov one of his narrators, an old soldier Maksim Maksimovich, describes Karagyoz(the exceptional male horse of Pechorin'sAbrekadversary Kazbich) as "black as coal, with legs like bow-strings and eyes as fine as Bela's!"(Lermontov, 2006: 19). Kazbich valued his horse more than his life and desired Circassian princess Bela, so Pechorin decided to deprive him of both. For these two men horses counted more. For Kazbich it is straightforwardly so, which is clear in the old song he sings: "Four wives are yours if you pay the gold;/ But a mettlesome steed is of price untold"(Lermontov, 2006: 22).Close readers of Lermontov's original have long noticed that the Russian form of "four wives" [*chetyrezheny*] suggests the object is inanimate. Significantly, this song parallels a passage in which Pechorin says that he keeps four horses[*chetyrekhloshadei*], that is, he speaks of horses as of the animate object (Lermontov, 2006: 96). As David Matualsummarized this parallel, Pechorin's "horses are animate while Kazbich's women are not" (Matual, 1995: 13). Consequently, in Pechorin and Kazbich'srivalry for a woman and horse, the horse survives but the woman does not.

Respecting the high status of horses, Pechorin rather cynically comments that "breeding in women, as in horses, is a great thing" (Lermontov, 2006: 72). Quite tellingly, after his meeting with Vera, the woman he supposedly loves, he thinks of the enjoyment of horse riding in the wilderness as preferable over a woman's company: "I love to gallop on a fiery horse through the tall grass, in the face of the desert wind… There is not a woman's glance which I would not forget at the sight of the tufted mountains…the dark-blue sky, or in hearkening to the roar of the torrent as it falls from cliff to cliff"(Lermontov, 2006: 109).

McGuane's character is also quite responsive to the beauty of nature as he could notice, for example, that "the heavy-trunked cottonwoods seemed to hold their dismaying branchloads of greenery in the awkward and beautiful whiteness which at a distance gives the valley bottom of the West almost their only sentimental quality" (McGuane, 1986: 146). Since Fitzpatrick is a native to the surrounding land, he borrows its "sentimental quality" for his attitude

to horses, so inseparable from the West, and almost personifies his mare: “she had an intelligent narrow face and the lightest rein imaginable” (McGuane, 1986: 99) and her eyes were “like tide pools” (McGuane, 1986:159). It is quite natural for him to have lyrical conversations with her: “Leafy, am I not thoughtless? I am. Left you in a cold corral with no kisses. Here is a kiss. What a beautiful horse you are” (McGuane, 1986: 159).Though “nobody’s angel” in human world, Patrick is Leafy’s angel. He saved her as a foal and made sure she had his attention when “he glimpsed sadness-for-no-reason in her eyes” (McGuane, 1986:159).

The antagonism between a “noble hero” and a “savage” that was somewhat ironic even in Lermontov’s romantic novel turns into a grim parody in McGuane. It involves a woman, but she isPatrick’s sister Mary who commits suicide. After her death, Patrick discovers she had had an affair with an Indian named David Catches, who comes to their place after the funeral. The two men self-mockingly discuss a possible duel asthe Indian asks,“What do you have for a weapon?” and Patrick replies, “I have my skinning knife…It is designed for disheartening an aborigine” (McGuane, 1986: 125-126). Their attempt of a duel resolves in joint drinking and accusations followed by a silent “ride home” (McGuane, 1986: 135).

A rivalry over a woman as a sexual target occurs between Fitzpatrick and his neighbor Tio. The day Patrick meets Tio’s wife Claire, he determines to become “somebody's angel” (McGuane, 1986: 35).Tio must have sensed this decision right awayas he sets a double challenge for Patrick by asking him to tame his ill-tempered male horse and “be a kind of a big brother”to his wife (McGuane, 1986: 56) while he is away on business.Thus Lermontov’s rivalry model is reversed in McGuane: while Pechorin was himself a manipulator, Fitzpatrick becomes a victim of manipulation.

Though in similar circumstances Pechorin and Fitzpatrick often demonstrate dissimilar qualities, a feature they share is theperception oftheir existence as literary, and therefore secondary.This feeling is stronger in Pechorin who complainsthat he has “entered upon that life after having already lived through it in thought, and it has become wearisome and nauseous to me, as the reading of a bad imitation of a book is to one who has long been familiar with the original” (Lermontov, 2006: 152). As many critics have noticed, his confessions imitate quotations from French novels such as *Les confessions d'un enfant du siècle* and *Adolphe*(Barratt and Briggs, 1989).

In Fitzpatrick’s familyit is Mary who is reading a French novel, De Laclos's*Liaisons Dangereuses*, just before her suicide and Patrick fails to register the significance of that choice. But he realizes that she is a tragic female superfluous and applies that very adjective to the church crowd whose “bit of drill” he watches angrily at Mary’s funeral (McGuane, 1986: 110).Fitzpatrick’s self-allusions are grimly ironic and are sometimes parodically applied to an imaginary literary source. Towards the finale of his relationship with Claire, he angrily puts her off by saying he is reading *The Life of Marion Easterly*“and it's by all three Brontë sisters” (McGuane, 1986: 204). Afterwards he “believed he felt like the Ancient Mariner at an abandoned bus stop” (McGuane, 1986: 215).

Marion Easterly wasthe first and last important woman in Fitzpatrick’s life, though she never existed. When a teenager, he invented her as his girlfriend to have an excuse for his outings.Once on coming back particularly late and drunk, he also invented her death and the next morning had to face a shameful scene as his parents discovered the truth. However, for Patrick, Marion Easterly,“a promise of Christian possibilities in her name's evocation of both Mary and Easter” (McClintock, 1997: 151) was perhaps truly “greatest love”, as his sister Mary insisted (McGuane, 1986: 181). While Pechorin makes his confessions to the real women, he seduced,Fitzpatrick confesses to Marion: “He told Marion that he was in love. He told her that his lady was married to a man of the oil”. To which Marion “raised her hands to the sides of her face, pretty as a picture” and shrewdly observed, “I fear very much for you at the hands of this person of oil” (McGuane, 1986: 182).

At end of McGuane’s novel, Fitzpatrick, “minimally alive” (McClintock, 1997: 139), returned to the army and spent all his leave timein Madrid, where he had dreamed to live since the beginning of his story.A local newspaper gossiper Deke Patwell “heard it from someone who knew someone who knew someone that he had a woman in Madrid, an American named Marion Easterly”. However, the rumor went that “when she was with him, he was a bit of blackout drinker” and “he never came back home again” (McGuane, 1986: 225). Thus the novel's epigraph from Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*: “I love hell. I can't wait to get back”, resonates in these final hopeless notes.

Patrick Fitzpatrick’s sense ofalienation and dislocation is echoed in McGuane's own experience on which he commented in an interview:

The outsider-stranger-bystander has always intrigued me in regard to my own family history. My family were all Irish immigrants. . . . People in Ireland feel like outsiders in their own country because the English have owned things for so long. . . . When they immigrated to the East Coast (my family went to Massachusetts), they saw themselves as an enclave of outsiders in a Yankee Protestant world. My parents moved to the Midwest, and I can assure you that . . . we did not consider ourselves to be Midwesterners. We saw ourselves as Catholics surrounded by Protestant Midwesterners. . . . When I moved to Montana in my twenties, I felt myself to be an outsider in still another world (McGuane, 1987: 203).

3. "Superfluous Man" as an "External Outsider"

While McGuane's novel is a classic third person narrative focused on the protagonist, another contemporary American novel about a Pechorin-like "superfluous man" also imitates Lermontov's multi-perspective form, praised for "the condition of openness which is the hallmark of the polyphonic method" (Barratt A. and A. D. P. Briggs: 133). This novel is *The Free World* (2011) by Latvian Canadian author David Bezmozgis. Bezmozgis debuted with a highly acclaimed collection *Natasha, and Other stories* (2004) and was named one of *The New Yorker's* "20 under 40." The collection has been discussed as an example of a short-story cycle, the hybrid genre also defined as a "short story sequence" (Kennedy, 1995; Luscher, 1989) and "composite novel" (Dunn and Morris, 1995). As Derek P. Royal noted,it is the case when "the medium indeed becomes the message" (Royal, 2012: 252). In his first novel Bezmozgis chose to retain the heteroglossia of his debut collection.

At the center of the novel, set in Rome in 1978, are three generations of the Krasnansky family, who have made an ordeal journey from Latvia to Italy via Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. In Rome, among other émigrés they struggle for resources and contacts as they wait for their visas to Canada.Bezmozgisgives voice to two generations of a family as his narrative alternates between the chapters of SamuilKrasnansky, the patriarch, his son Alec and his daughter-in-law Polina and "never pretends that his confused, self-interested characters are admirable, virtuous or even likable, but he respects them nonetheless. His book pays tribute to their tenacity and to their sometimes accidental courage" (Schillinger, 2011).

Alec is a carefree womanizer for whom emigration simply offered "more freedom to bumble"."Basically, he was of the opinion that the world would be a far more interesting and hospitable place if everyone − genius and idiot alike – was allowed to bumble along as he pleased" (Bezmozgis, 2011a: 93). His future coworkers at the Russian émigré service immediately and unmistakably identify him as a "superfluous person" (Bezmozgis, 2011a: 92). In Bezmozgis the ironic allusive strand to *A Hero of Our Time* is more explicit than in McGuane. Alec's mother Emma triggers this strand as she calls a Gypsies' shanty, where the family had to stay after a humiliating customs inspection, "Taman, Lermontov's epitome of squalor" (Bezmozgis, 2011a: 287).

Lermontov did describe Taman as "the nastiest little hole of all the seaports of Russia" (Lermontov, 2006: 65), where his Pechorin was attracted to an eighteen-year-old Undine with "bright and piercing eyes, endowed with a certain magnetic power" who nearly drowned him for interfering in the smugglers' affairs (Lermontov, 2006: 73). Pechorin regrets he disturbed the quietude of a "peaceful circle of honourable smugglers" like a "stone cast into a smooth well" (Lermontov, 2006: 8).

Out of a similar nonchalant curiosity Alec becomes interested in a twentyish Masha who has "dramatic, arched eyebrows and large, coltish eyes" and a "perpetual mystery" about her. Even a stony look of Masha's criminal brother "festooned with prison markings" does not scare Alec off; moreover, out of a "masochistic urge to spite" his wife after a row, he joins a group of unpleasant acquaintances, including the brother, in a ride which turns out to be a smugglers' secret meeting. An unfortunate schemer Iza invites Alec partly as "another pair of arms" for carrying briefcases and partly as his witness for the hope of an honest transaction (Bezmozgis, 2011a: 184-191).

The last hope turns to be useless as the smugglers beat Iza up, and Masha's brother slugs Alec in the face to let him "understand who he is dealing with." To top this adventure a few days later a new Undine shows up in Alec's apartment with her upper lip "split and swollen" and accuses him of "taking advantage of her" and on her disagreement to an abortion, beating her. She makes a similar scene in his parents' house, thus practically drowning Alec in a well of his family's scorn (Bezmozgis, 2011a: 320-322). Thus the "serpent-like nature" of Lermontov's Undine that "bore up against the torture" (Lermontov, 2006: 75) degenerated into an offspring of the "nest of vipers", which a new romantic hero failed to identify(Bezmozgis, 2011a: 342).

Similarly to Patrick Fitzpatrick, Alec Krasnansky falls victim to circumstances and feels sympathetic to the feeling of alienation, even in unlikeable people: "It then occurred to Alec that everybody had a rough time in the emigration, including a thief like Minka. He too was vulnerable and confused. He had been cast into alien surroundings and was now obliged to compete…" (Bezmozgis, 2011a: 102). A Russian American interviewer remarked that Alec feels like "the most modern sort of character", to which David Bezmozgis readily agreed:

Modern is a good way to describe him because he is not weighed down by history the way everyone else is… Alec has no real direction other than pleasure, which I guess is quite modern. He has no God, no ideology. The irony for him is that it was much easier for him to float through life in the Soviet Union than it is in Italy, where he really gets into trouble for the first time. He's forced into a kind of maturation (Bezmozgis 2011b).

4. Conclusion.

The broadening of the cultural context beyond "one's own", "prescribed" by origin seems to have become a trend in contemporary American literature and often involves Russian classics. The two authors discussed in this article implicitly (McGuane) and more explicitly (Bezmozgis) refer to Lermontov's "superfluous man" to comment on their "heroes of our time". McGuane's character, born and raised in the United States, still feels alien in his native land and strikes as quite a tragic figure of an "internal outsider". Bezmozgis's character is an immigrant in a true sense and he seems likely to stay an "external outsider" for any non-native country where he will have to dwell, and at least in his case this position does not seem as tragic as the position of an "internal outsider". In the early twentieth century, American literature already had a highly perceptive dialogue with classical Russian texts. Now this dialogue reoccurs and Russian texts become mediators to transcend boundaries and contribute to translating individual narratives into transcultural stories. Certainly, transnational intertextuality is not an invention of recent decades. What is new is the increased freedom of incorporating an appropriated word that becomes an inseparable part of today's transcultural texts.

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